

00901

1963/08/21

~~SECRET~~/NO FOREIGN DISSEM

03

DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BUREAU OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

Research Memorandum
RFE-75, August 21, 1963

TO : The Acting Secretary
THROUGH: S/S
FROM : INR - Thomas L. Hughes *Thomas L. Hughes*
SUBJECT: Diem Versus the Buddhists: The Issue Joined

A midnight police raid on the Xa Loi pagoda followed by the declaration of martial law throughout South Vietnam climaxed three months of mounting tension between Buddhists and the Diem regime. This joining of the issue pitted self-immolation and massive demonstrations against armed force. The following paper highlights the contending factions and examines the prospects for future developments.

ABSTRACT

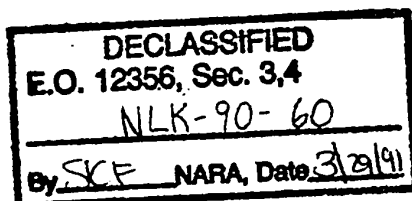
From a single incident of May 7-8, Buddhist demands and governmental reactions have led to an ever-deepening crisis in South Vietnam. Sensed grievances against governmental discrimination spurred Buddhist leaders to increasingly activist positions. Formal governmental acquiescence in demands for full equality for Buddhists and punitive action against those responsible for the May incident have not allayed rising Buddhist suspicion that perhaps only major changes in the Diem regime can remedy the situation. Evidence is lacking that Buddhist leaders seek the overthrow of the government. However, Diem's belief, fostered by Ngo Dinh Nhu and Madame Nhu, that opposition elements, including the Viet Cong, have exploited the Buddhists, has led to increased intransigence and the use of force. On August 21, police attacks on the main pagoda in Saigon followed by the proclamation of martial law brought the confrontation to a head. The prospects for the restoration of stability and mutual confidence appear extremely remote. Most importantly, the degree to which Diem can count on the army to suppress future Buddhist moves is most uncertain.

The Buddhist Protest Movement

That an isolated Buddhist incident in the city of Hue on May 7-8, 1963, quickly mushroomed into a national crisis and developed into an organized

GROUP-3

Downgraded at 12-year intervals,
not automatically declassified.



~~SECRET~~/NO FOREIGN DISSEM

protest movement would indicate smoldering and long-held grievances by the Buddhist majority in South Vietnam. Whether Buddhist charges of discrimination or suppression can be proven or disproven has become academic. More importantly, the Catholicism of Diem, his family, and many top government officials has fostered Buddhist suspicions. Many responsible Buddhist leaders and much of the priesthood obviously believe their grievances to be just,

Relatively unobserved during the past decade have also been the accelerated efforts of Buddhist leaders in South Vietnam to revitalize Buddhism and reorganize and expand its monastic and lay organizations. In the course of the present crisis, the General Association of Buddhists of Vietnam (GABV), the largest and best-organized of the several monastic and lay Buddhist associations, has emerged as the spokesman for the interests of other Buddhist groups in South Vietnam. The GABV, which claims about one million lay adherents and is a member of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, consists of parallel monastic and lay organizations. Thich Thien Khiet is both president of the GABV and the superior bonze of the monastic order, while Mai Tho Truyen is head or secretary general of the lay organization. The GABV coordinates protest activities through a recently-formed "Intersect Committee for the Defense of Buddhism" representing all legitimate Buddhist associations; no other Buddhist group has questioned the role or the tactics of the GABV.

The Buddhist protest movement so far appears to be active in urban areas, e.g., Saigon, Hue, Dalat, Tourane (or Danang), Nha Trang, Phan Thiet, and Faifo. Only one reliable report on reactions in the countryside tells of people wearing arm bands to mourn the first immolated monk. However, the rural populace is undoubtedly aware of the crisis to some degree since there has been ample time for the Buddhist leadership to transmit its views and instructions to most of South Vietnam's some 5,000 pagodas. In short, the initial incident and subsequent governmental reactions have sparked a widespread movement of discontent.

Judging from the tactics pursued to date, the Buddhist protest movement appears to be still in the hands of moderates, chief of whom are Thich Thien Khiet and Thich Tam Chau, head of the intersect committee. However, key activists favor more militant moves. Such men include Thich Tri Quang, chief abbot of the GABV's Association of Buddhist Monks in Central Vietnam, and Thich Duc Nghiep, head of press relations for the GABV. This activist influence has increased substantially with the intensification of Buddhist suspicions of government intentions, especially among the youth which is becoming more involved in demonstrations. Most recently Buddhist leaders reportedly initiated a plan to dissuade the faithful from voting during the National Assembly elections scheduled for August 31, 1963. If true, this would suggest that activist domination seriously threatens the original moderate leadership.

Buddhist Objectives

The Buddhist leaders still retain as their immediate objective full satisfaction of their original demands: permission to fly the Buddhist flag; compensation for those killed during the May 8 demonstrations in Hue; protection against discrimination, harassment, and arbitrary police measures by local officials; and revision of laws (specifically, Ordinance No. 10 promulgated in 1950) allegedly extending special privileges to the Roman Catholic Church while denying them to the Buddhists. In sum, they insist on an end to real or imagined discriminatory practices by local officials and demand institutional equality with the Catholic Church. However, we see no evidence that they wish to establish an institutional or officially recognized primacy for Buddhism.

In a formal agreement signed by President Diem and Thich Thien Khiet on June 16, the government recognized these demands and has since taken measures to implement them. A new decree permits display of the Buddhist flag by Buddhist groups; all agree that this decree is being justly implemented. The government has sent Ordinance No. 10 to the National Assembly for legislative action, and the Buddhists have not yet questioned its good faith on this score. Some effort has been made to compensate the families of the May 8 victims. Finally, a special government committee, headed by Vice President Tho, has been established to implement further the June 16 accord and to investigate all complaints by the Buddhists.

The Buddhist leadership, however, continues to charge local officials with arresting and otherwise harassing Buddhists. They deny repeated government claims that, except for those considered Communist agents, all Buddhist detainees have been released from jail. They claim that compensation for the May 8 victims has not been adequate. Most importantly, Buddhist leaders insist that persons within the government are subverting President Diem's policy of conciliation, rendering Vice President Tho's committee powerless, and planning to discredit and ultimately suppress both the Buddhist leadership and the protest movement itself. They have therefore announced that they will not enter into any discussions with the government until the powers of the Tho committee are more specifically defined and as long as monks and lay Buddhists remain under arrest or detention or are being harassed by local officials. In the meantime, the Buddhists have added to their original demands by insisting that the government compensate victims injured by government actions against demonstrators in Hue on June 3, 1963.

There is no hard evidence that local officials are harassing Buddhist clerics and laymen to the extent claimed. While several Buddhists have been beaten up, resulting in one death, governmental responsibility cannot be proven.

Conversely, we have no reliable evidence that Buddhist activities aim specifically at the overthrow of the government. However, increasing conviction that their demands will not be met has undoubtedly led at least the more activist leaders, some of whom may have been politically motivated from the beginning, to conclude that only change within the government can

resolve the crisis. The refusal of the Buddhist leadership to meet with Vice President Tho's committee, despite Diem's public statement on August 15 that it had full powers to implement policy on this issue, suggests the Buddhists will now settle for nothing less than the removal of Ngo Dinh Nhu and his wife as the chief critics of Diem's conciliation policy.

Non-Buddhist Influence

We have no reliable evidence that the Buddhist leadership is in active collusion with the Viet Cong or with non-Communist oppositionist elements. Various oppositionists undoubtedly have made overtures to the Buddhists and have attempted to persuade them to continue their protests at all costs. Some oppositionists may even have sought Buddhist support to overthrow the government. However, so far the Buddhists seem to have avoided direct involvement, although the view that a change in government is necessary coincides with, if it is not influenced by, oppositionist views.

Nor do we have any reliable evidence that the Viet Cong are exerting any direct influence on the Buddhist leadership. It is possible that some penetration of the monkhood and lay organizations has occurred over the years. Some recalcitrants may have contacts with Buddhist leaders in Communist North Vietnam or with the Hanoi-directed "National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NFLSV)". Certainly Hanoi and NFLSV broadcasts publicize the Buddhist issue, principally for foreign consumption, but we have virtually no information on Viet Cong activity on this point in the countryside. In any event, we must assume that the Viet Cong are expectantly waiting in the wings for a propitious moment to capitalize on developments.

Regime Responses

Despite conciliatory moves, Diem has consistently held that the entire crisis was provoked for personal or political gain and that the Buddhist leadership is Communist-influenced. Thus he has denied the legitimacy of Buddhist grievances and has underestimated the potential impact of Buddhist hostility on the stability of the government. In these views, Diem has been greatly influenced by Ngo Dinh Nhu and Madam Nhu who in effect have become the principal architects and spokesmen of policy on this issue. In short, the Diem family has seen the crisis essentially in security terms and has remained relatively confident that it could eventually discredit the Buddhist leadership and reduce the protest movement to minimal proportions.

The result has been a rather schizophrenic approach to the problem. While reiterating a conciliatory policy, Diem has condoned the inflammatory statements of the Nhuses. Buddhist demonstrations, in most cases peaceful and unprovocative, have frequently been countered by sheer force or security measures, such as barricading of pagodas, deployment of military troops, and institution of martial law. The climax came on August 21 when police and army troops suddenly attacked the main pagoda in Saigon and killed, wounded, or arrested an unknown number of monks. Within hours, troop reinforcements were rushed to the capital and Diem proclaimed martial law throughout the country, giving the army "full authority in all matters."

Prospects

The sudden injection of the army into the Buddhist crisis has introduced an entirely new factor. Military elements have been consistently critical of Diem's measures and there has been a flurry of reported coup plots against the Diem family by military and civil officials. The Buddhist leaders themselves have undoubtedly felt that their grievances have had wide support within the bureaucracy and the military establishment, and may be stunned by the participation of the army units in brutal assaults on their pagoda and the establishment of martial law.

However, the predominantly Buddhist composition of the armed forces makes uncertain its continued reliability should further Buddhist suicides or demonstrations be attempted. Nor is it likely that the resort to force will win Diem any support outside his own family circle. While the crisis may be temporarily dampened down, it is far from resolved.